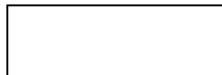




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# **The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for the Arab-Israeli Military Balance**

An Intelligence Assessment

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# The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for the Arab-Israeli Military Balance

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*Information available as of 15 December 1980  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

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**The Iran-Iraq War:  
Implications for the  
Arab-Israeli Military Balance**

**Key Judgments**

The war between Iran and Iraq has clearly widened the margin of Israel's military superiority over its enemies. The Arab forces that could be arrayed against Israel will be sharply reduced as long as tensions remain high around the Persian Gulf.

The effects of the war have militarily isolated Syria, whose armed forces were already qualitatively inferior to Israel's and weakened by commitments to keeping peace in Lebanon and maintaining security at home. Most of Iraq's Army and Air Force, the principal potential contributors of expeditionary forces to Syria's Golan Heights front against Israel, will be tied down against Iran for the duration of the war and probably longer, depending on the outcome. Jordan would be even less likely than before to open a front against Israel in view of the probable noninvolvement of major Iraqi units and the deterioration of Jordanian-Syrian relations.


The military isolation of Syria is likely to be transient. Conflict with Israel is a central and unifying issue for the Arab states. As soon as the crisis in the Persian Gulf subsides, Iraq and the other potential contributors of forces will again seek ways to renew their commitment to the front.

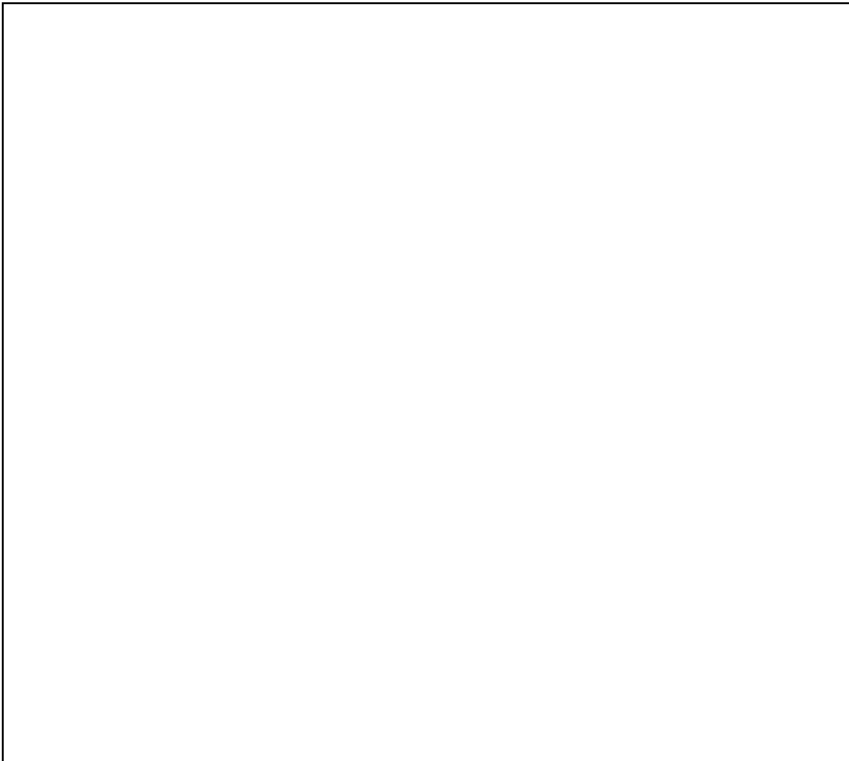
Nonetheless, Arab ability to confront Israel militarily probably will not reach the prewar level for several years. The war has fueled domestic turmoil and exacerbated the poor relations among Arab states—factors that have long frustrated the effective coordination of their forces against Israel.

The outcome of the war will define the timing and extent of the rehabilitation of Arab strength against Israel:

- An Iraqi victory would pose the greatest eventual threat to Israel, but Baghdad would have to pacify its eastern border and patch up relations with Syria before moving against Israel.
- A military stalemate or severe political setback for Iraq would prolong the period of military tension around the Gulf and the diversion of Arab military strength away from Israel.
- Even if a Shia regime that was pro-Iranian and militantly anti-Israeli were to replace the present Iraqi Government, Islamic reforms, political purges,

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internal turmoil, poor discipline, and erratic leadership would reduce the readiness, effectiveness, and probably the size of Iraqi forces for several years. 



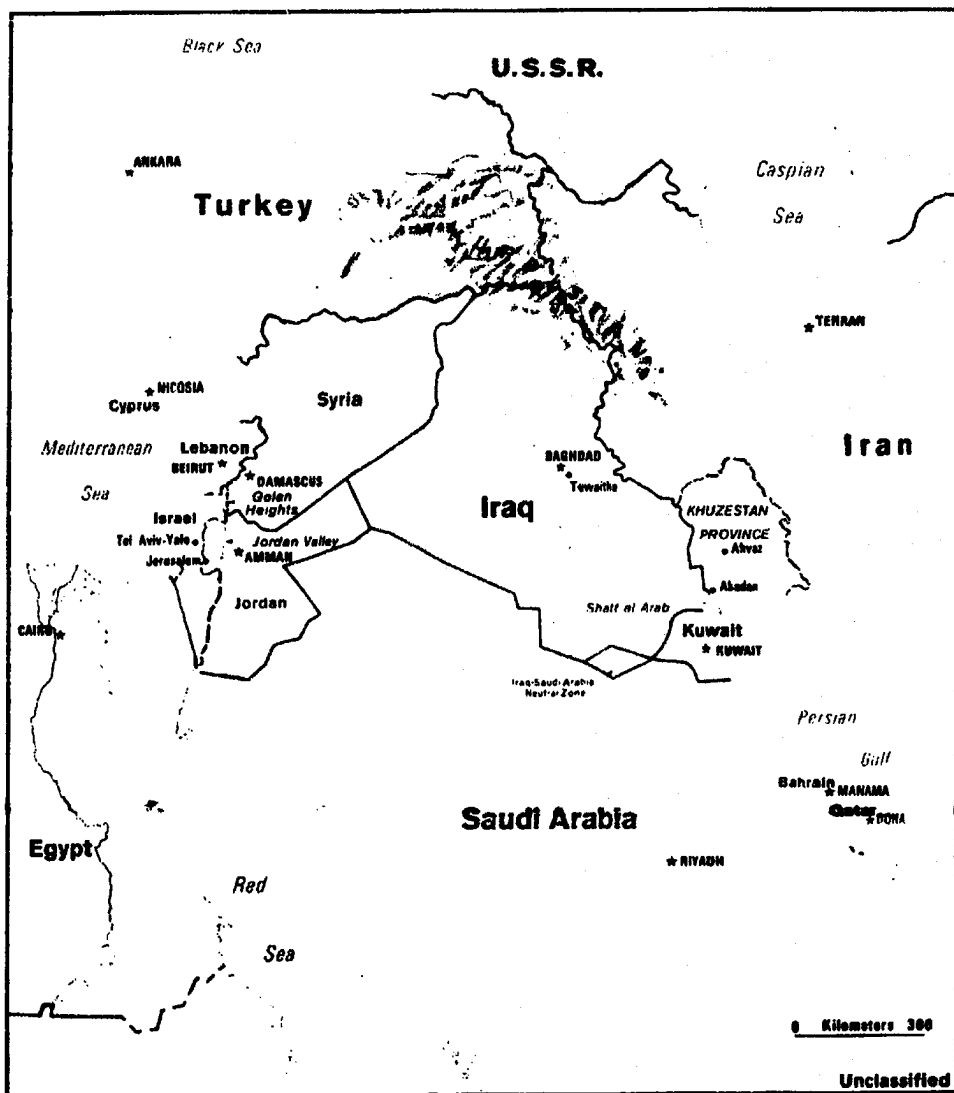
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## The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for the Arab-Israeli Military Balance

### Near-Term Reduction of Arab Threat to Israel

The war between Iran and Iraq sharply reduces the Arab forces that could be arrayed against Israel. Most of Iraq's Army and Air Force, the principal potential contributors of expeditionary forces to the Golan Heights-Jordan Valley front against Israel, will be tied down against Iran for the duration of the war and probably longer, depending on the outcome.

Iraq's military had embarked on an impressive expansion and modernization program that would have increased the size and quality of its contribution to any new Arab-Israeli war well above that of the two divisions that arrived at the front in 1973. Even before the war with Iran, Iraq could not have committed its entire armed forces against Israel because of internal and external security considerations and logistic problems. Nonetheless, assuming that both Kurdistan and the Iranian border were quiet, Iraq could have contributed as many as five ground divisions and six squadrons of combat aircraft to an Arab war effort—more than twice the force committed during the 1973 war. By 1985, Iraq's expeditionary forces would have had a high percentage of modern weaponry. For example, about half of their 1,860 tanks would have been T-72s, and 40 percent of their 500 artillery pieces would have been self-propelled.

In the near term, the Iran-Iraq war reduces the capability and willingness of other states to send forces to fight Israel and leaves Syria militarily isolated. Iran, a non-Arab state not previously expected to send more than a token force to the Golan, would be unable to commit any regular military units as long as fighting continues with Iraq. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which might have sent a few battalions to the front, would probably keep all their forces at home given the dangerous situation around the Persian Gulf. Jordan would be even less likely than before to open a front against Israel if Iraqi units were not going to join the war in strength, though it might, as in 1973, make a small contribution to Syria's Golan Heights front. The Egyptians probably will not fight in a new war because

of their peace treaty with Tel Aviv and the deterioration of their overall military position relative to that of Israel. They would certainly not risk entering a war in which the full weight of Arab power would not be marshaled.

Libya, despite both its past promises of aid to Syria and recent negotiations with Damascus concerning political unification, is likely to make only a marginal contribution to Syria's military capabilities. Libya has not fulfilled the financial commitments it made to Syria at the 1978 Arab summit in Baghdad, and neither country appears interested in establishing more than a facade of unity. Because of Libya's limited manpower resources, much of its ground force weaponry remains in storage, and Libyan pilots can man less than half of the country's combat aircraft. Syrian President Assad apparently wants to obtain some of Libya's excess inventory of aircraft and tanks, and Libya has sent MIG-23 aircraft to Syria to replace MIG-21s lost in combat with Israel over Lebanon. Nonetheless, Syria already has more weaponry than it can integrate into the existing organizational structure of its military, given its own manpower constraints. Moreover, Damascus is regularly receiving additional equipment from the USSR. Syria's greatest military requirement in case of war with Israel would be the prompt arrival of a multidivision expeditionary force; Libya's Army is too small and too distant to meet this need.

The substantial reduction of military threats from states other than Syria tips the Arab-Israeli balance from an already strong Israeli advantage to one of Israeli dominance.<sup>1</sup> Although President Assad might still consider undertaking limited military action against Israel for diplomatic and political gains, the risks of such action are now greatly increased.

<sup>1</sup> See NIE 35/36-80, *The Arab-Israeli Military Balance, 1980-85* for a detailed analysis of military capabilities in the region prior to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war.



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Even before the Iran-Iraq war, Israel would have maintained a wide margin of superiority through the greater operational effectiveness of its forces. This advantage would have been based on such decisive factors as higher quality manpower, superior leadership and training, greater motivation, better command and control, and excellent organizational flexibility.

If Syria were not reinforced significantly by other Arab armies, the Arabs would lose the quantitative advantages that help ameliorate their qualitative inferiority, and Israel would gain greater dominance on the battlefield.

Syria's present capability against Israel. Some of the weaponry listed is in storage or inoperable. One-fourth of Syria's maneuver brigades are tied down in Lebanon, and most of its special forces are being used to suppress internal unrest in the northern cities, away from the Golan Heights area. Moreover, President Assad recently withdrew over two divisions from supporting positions behind the frontlines on the Golan Heights and sent them to southern Syria to threaten Jordan. Most of these units subsequently returned to their original positions.

Syria's efforts to improve its military position without relying on reinforcements from Iraq and Jordan will fail. Even before the war between Iraq and Iran, Damascus had sought to draw closer to Libya and the Soviet Union to reduce its diplomatic isolation. The war has given new impetus to this process and may have hastened the signing of the Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship and cooperation. Realizing their military vulnerability, the Syrians probably hoped to use Soviet political support to create at least a facade of deterrence against Israel, although the treaty falls well short of a military defense pact.

Syria's armed forces alone, however, cannot absorb enough new weapons to achieve parity with Israel.

#### Long-Term Consequences

The current military isolation of Syria is likely to be transient. Conflict with Israel is a central and unifying

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issue for the Arab states. As soon as the crisis in the Persian Gulf subsides, Iraq and the other potential contributors of forces will again seek ways to renew their commitment to the front. [ ]

Nonetheless, Arab ability to confront Israel militarily probably will not reach the prewar level for several years. The outcome of the war will define the timing and extent of the rehabilitation of Arab strength against Israel, but the war has already exacerbated the internal problems and poor relations among Arab states that frustrate the effective coordination of their forces against Israel. An Iraqi victory would pose the greatest eventual threat to Israel, but Baghdad would have to pacify its eastern border and patch up relations with Syria before moving against Israel. A military stalemate or severe political setback for Iraq would prolong the period of military tension around the Gulf and the diversion of Arab military strength away from Israel.<sup>2</sup> [ ]

**Inter-Arab Relations.** The wide range of Arab reactions to the Iran-Iraq war suggests that the conflict has heightened tensions among the Arabs despite their mutual anti-Persian feelings. Libya and Syria have given support and assistance to Iran, whereas Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf states have supported Iraq. The conflict thus worsens Syria's relations with Iraq and Jordan, further impeding effective coordination among those Arab armies that might fight together on the Golan Heights. We would expect the Arab states to set aside their quarrels if war broke out with Israel, but their current differences preclude the peacetime consultations, planning, and joint exercises that would be necessary to effectively employ their combined strength. [ ]

Differences between Syria and Jordan over King Hussein's support of Iraq were among the factors that led Damascus to send more than two divisions to Syria's southern border to threaten Jordan. The ensuing crisis caused both countries to divert forces from their fronts with Israel and placed further impediments to future military cooperation between Amman and Damascus. (s)

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the consequences of three general scenarios for the current war, see SNIE 34/36.2-80, *Implications of Various Outcomes of the Iran-Iraq War* (Secret). [ ]

On the other hand, the current war has contributed to expanded military ties between Iraq and Jordan. Because King Hussein played a timely and key role in rallying Arab support for Iraq, Baghdad has lavishly praised the King, offered additional aid, and promised closer political relations. Increased financial assistance from Iraq and other Arab states could enable Jordan to acquire more sophisticated equipment for its military. Jordan's small Army, however, has a limited capacity to absorb new equipment. Increased cooperation between Iraq and Jordan could increase their effectiveness in operations against Israel, but Jordan will remain reluctant to challenge directly Israeli military might. [ ]

**Stalemate.** Despite its successes thus far, the Iraqi military probably cannot apply enough pressure to achieve Baghdad's ambitious strategic objectives in the near future. These objectives are Iranian recognition of Iraqi claims to border territories and the Shatt al Arab waterway, an Iranian pledge to refrain from interfering in Arab affairs, and the return of three Gulf islands to Arab control. [ ]

Baghdad has already resigned itself to a war of attrition, which the Iraqis believe they will eventually win. But a successful guerrilla war in Khuzestan, outside assistance for Iran, or an Iranian refusal to negotiate would probably extend the conflict in ways difficult for Baghdad to control. [ ]

Iraq probably can hold its current positions indefinitely, even if the Soviet Union continues to withhold major military equipment and spare parts, but the lack of full Soviet support will inhibit an Iraqi decision to increase the intensity of combat or to advance farther. Iran, on the other hand, has an acute need of spare parts. It faces a severe decline in its air capabilities, which could only be arrested after several months of sustained delivery of US-made spare parts. [ ]

The Iraqis are unlikely to open a major new offensive into Khuzestan until they capture Abadan and the salient northwest of Ahvaz. Iranian ground forces cannot soon reverse the course of the war by launching a major counterattack, but Iran probably will seek to frustrate any further Iraqi advances by reinforcing the threatened cities in Khuzestan with Revolutionary

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Guards and additional combat groups formed by combining small units from several divisions. The Iraqi Air Force will be capable of attacking Iran's petroleum-refining capability for many months, thus leaving Iran at risk of extreme domestic hardship. [ ]

An extended conflict would focus Arab military attention on the Gulf for the duration, increase Iraqi losses, and delay force improvement programs. Prolonged fighting probably also would increase active opposition to the Baghdad regime among Iraq's Kurds, Shia, and anti-Saddam Baathists, compelling Iraq to retain additional military units at home to meet these threats. [ ]

***Iraqi Defeat.*** If Iraqi vacillation or stubborn Iranian resistance were somehow to force a political defeat for Iraq, enhanced Israeli military superiority would be ensured for a longer period. Politically, the Iranians could win a victory—even if Iraqi forces were undefeated in the field—if Iraqi President Saddam Hussein were to be toppled or discredited in the Arab world after his forces became bogged down in Iran. [ ]

Such an Iranian victory would ensure enhanced Israeli military superiority over the Arabs for at least the next five years. Iran would lack the capability following the war to send more than token forces to the Golan Heights or southern Lebanon, and Iraq's forces might need substantial rebuilding. A severe setback for Iraq would drain its military strength and would increase Shia unrest in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, thus focusing attention on internal problems and away from the dispute with Israel, despite a likely increase in militant Arab rhetoric. If the present government survived in Baghdad, it would see Tehran as the main threat and probably would not be inclined to challenge the Israelis until the score with Iran was settled. Even if a pro-Iranian, Shia regime were to replace the present Iraqi Government, Islamic reforms, political purges, internal turmoil, poor discipline, and erratic leadership would reduce the readiness, effectiveness, and probably the size of Iraqi forces for several years. [ ]

***Iraqi Victory.*** Iraq's influence and strategic position would be greatly enhanced if it achieved a decisive victory over Tehran. If the Iraqis were to succeed in prompting the overthrow of Ayatollah Khomeini, they

would have won a victory virtually regardless of whether they had attained their territorial goals. Short of that, the Iraqis must sufficiently cripple the Iranian Army and Air Force to permit Baghdad to solidify its hold on the Shatt al Arab and those parts of Khuzestan critical to Iran's oil economy. This would increase the military and economic pressure on Tehran to agree to a truce and demonstrate the capability of Iraqi forces to other states in the region. [ ]

After a "victorious" end to the war, Iraq would probably:

- Accelerate the ongoing modernization and expansion of its military and economy, with emphasis on replacing items lost in the war and correcting war-revealed deficiencies in air defense and air force performance.
- Use its enhanced strategic position to encourage other Arab oil producers to spend more of their wealth and influence to promote military and diplomatic action against Israel.
- Attempt to extend wartime cooperation with Jordan into closer military and political ties between the two countries. [ ]

The aftermath of the war, however, would continue to limit the size of the force that Iraq could send against Israel. Virtually all of Iraq's Army would continue to be stationed either along the Iranian border or in Kurdistan, as it was before the current conflict. During a war between the Arab states and Israel, Iraq would probably attempt to move some of these forces to the Golan Heights or Jordan Valley, especially if the border with Iran were quiet and Tehran were to join the ranks against Israel. Nonetheless, Baghdad, even under the best of circumstances, would warily leave more forces facing Iran and the Kurds than it would have before the war with Iran. Even if the present Iranian leadership were overthrown and replaced by one more favorable to Iraq, or if Iran disintegrated into a group of smaller states, or if Iraq decisively defeated Iran's regular armed forces, the border area probably would remain volatile and require the continued garrisoning of Iraqi forces. [ ]

Moreover, the performance of the Iraqi forces against Iran suggests that they would perform poorly against the far more formidable Israelis. Baghdad has gained

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valuable experience in combat and in planning and controlling large-scale operations that could improve its performance in a future conflict. Nonetheless, despite operating under favorable geographic conditions, with the initiative, and against a debilitated foe, the Iraqis moved too timidly to exploit their advantages. They chose to advance slowly, in part to limit losses while affording Tehran opportunity to negotiate. Such cautious and hesitant military tactics, as well as Iraq's weaknesses in air defense, however, would be quickly exploited by the flexible and opportunistic Israel Defense Forces. [REDACTED]

#### **Israeli Reaction to the War**

The Israelis have been cautious in their appraisals of the long-term implications of the war. Initial Israeli commentary on the war was preoccupied with the probability that Iraq would emerge victorious and closer to its objective of dominating the Arab world.

[REDACTED]

Israeli spokesmen have also expressed concern that the war, together with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the recently signed Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and Syria, has increased Soviet influence in the Middle East and created new opportunities for Moscow. Some Israelis suspect the Soviets are maintaining a neutral position on the conflict so that they can eventually offer to mediate. Former Foreign Minister Dayan, for example, believes a successful mediation effort by Moscow "would put the Soviets in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria" and further reduce US influence in the region.

[REDACTED]

The Begin government claims particular dismay over the wartime cooperation between Jordan and Iraq, fearing that the ties between the two countries might eventually work against Israel.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the conflict may persist at varying levels of violence for years, tying up much of Iraq's military strength. Israeli press correspondents and diplomats have drawn particular attention to their perception that the war has partially diverted attention from the Palestinian issue and demonstrated that the Arab-Israeli dispute is not the only source of dangerous instability in the Middle East.

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